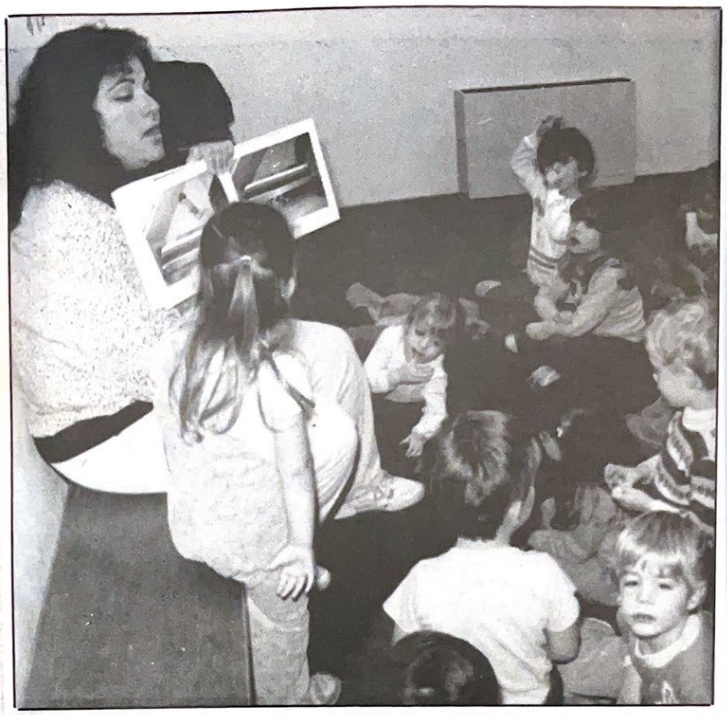

CHILDREN GATHER around Camas librarian Nikki Maounis as she reads them a book during the library's story time, which begins at 10:30 every Wednesday. The fact that children have a library to enjoy was made possible by the work of the Camas Relief and Civic Improvement Club. (Staff photo by Jon Larson)

Camas Library sprang from active civic group

The Camas Public Library was the 1922 inspiration of the Camas Relief and Civic Improvement Club, a membership which later simply became known as the Camas Womens Club.

Formed in 1915, the club was active in its early years assisting the poor of the community, aiding the World War I effort, prodding the city council on community beautification projects, and in spearheading the formation of the Camas Cemetery Association.

When the idea of establishing a library surfaced, it only took the Womens Club six months to obtain a promise of 150 books from the state of Washington traveling library. Soon, a location for the local library — Arthur Thayer's drugstore, at the corner of Fourth and Adam, was confirmed.

When the library opened in 1923 it did so with the 150 book collection and a single book shelf. Within a year, the rotating book total provided by the state had doubled to 300. In the early months, club members and employees of the drugstore were the most frequent library patrons. Soon the community support for the library flourished, as an annual drive for second-hand books was held.

By 1925, recognizing the library needed more space, the Camas City Council agreed that the library should be moved to the council chambers. And in 1927, the city council began to contribute to the library's operation.

The library's first board of directors was established in 1928 with Katherine Bain serving as chair. She is recognized as one of the primary leaders for the library in its early years. Other board members included: Marjorie Smith, Gladys Carleton, Mariette Hoxsie and Don Mitchell.

The city of Camas assumed responsibility for the library in 1929 after a series of sometimes heated debates. And Ethel Roffler was hired as a part-time librarian. But as before, the Womens Club members continue to offer key assistance. By this time, the volume of books in the library had grown to more than 2,500 with the donation of 800 books from the now-defunct state traveling library. Out of space again, the library was moved to the old West Coast Telephone Co. building at the corner of Fifth and Cedar.

Space and financial problems were not over, however. During the Depression, the Womens Club twice was called upon to balance the library's budget. In 1932, the library moved again and by 1937, it was determined that more space was needed for the library and other city operations.

In 1939, voters approved a bond levy for a new city hall-library, which was dedicated in 1940 by the governor. Some 27 years later, both the library and city operations had stretched the capacity of the beautiful Georgian brick building located along Fourth Avenue. In 1967, the city completed the construction of a separate municipal building, allowing for the library to expand its services and collection of books to tens of thousands of volumes — far beyond its early days offering of only 150 volumes.